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ABSTRACT

"New wave" gender theorists (those who ascribe to feminist post-structuralist theory) caution that nonsexist work with young children is likely to be unsuccessful in the long term because theories of gender and the approach to gender in the curriculum have, until now, ignored one key issue: the question of power. This booklet explores the power dynamics in children's play, especially in children's storylines. Sections of the booklet explore gender and power in play, power relationships in children's play, overt power relationships, and the legacy of overt expressions of power. Also explored are covert expressions of power, especially storylines, and the roles of girls, boys, and girls and boys together. The next sections include a discussion of gender, power, and storylines; approaches to challenging power relationships; the identification of the power effects of children's play; and evaluation of the power effects of children's storylines. The final sections of the booklet: introduce storylines which minimize sexist power effects; relate a case study of a boy who developed an appreciation of caring, domestic storylines after interventions over several months; and provide concluding remarks. Contains 10 references, 5 of which the author found particularly useful on new wave theory. (DR)

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The Power of Mum!

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Gender & power at play

Glenda MacNaughton

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The Power of Mum!

Power & gender at play

Glenda MacNaughton

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Photographs: Joanna Jankaus. Thanks to the children and staff at the Black Mountain Child Care Centre.

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The Power of Mum!
Gender and power at play

Children cannot grow up in Australian society without a clear sense of themselves as either male or female. 'New wave'[1] theorists argue that as children learn about gender, they also learn sexist values and relationships (Davies, 1989). By the age of four many children have very sexist understandings of what it means to be male and female in Australian society. Their ideas can persist into adulthood and can affect children's choices in education, career and lifestyle.

Children develop sexist behaviours, actions and knowledge as a result of their involvement with sexist power relations in the wider social, cultural, economic and cultural milieu (Davies, 1989). For instance, children learn that some ways of being masculine and feminine are considered superior to others (Connell, 1987). They also learn to see the other gender as 'the enemy'. In the words of three children of the nineties:

Daryl: Girls are yuk.

Molly: Boys hurt you.

Shona: Girls and boys are on different teams.

As a result of such beliefs, children as young as three can actively participate in creating and maintaining asymmetrical power relationships. The new wave theorists argue that these uneven power relationships regularly work against the interests of many girls and some boys.

Alloway (1993) insists that it is time to recognise the impact of sexist power relationships in our work with young children. She believes that early childhood workers need to rethink models of gender relations and to challenge models which assume that '... male and female roles are equally culturally valued and ignore the asymmetrical power relationships that underlie gender'(Alloway, 1993, p.4).

Theorists argue that as children learn about gender, they also learn sexist values and relationships.

[1] 'New wave' theory is a term used by the author to describe feminist post-structuralist theory.

Power relationships in children's play

Recognising and analysing the gendered power relationships in children's play takes practice, time and an understanding of how children build and maintain power relationships. Being able to say how boys and girls in your centre use space, and choose activities and friends is the first step towards understanding the power relationships in your centre. Using timed spot checks of where children are playing can indicate if there are particular areas of the centre where one gender dominates or where cross-gender play seems to be occurring. This can give you clues as to where there may be uneven power relationships. In looking for these relationships it is important to be alert to both the direct and indirect ways in which children's play can express gendered power relationships.

Overt power relationships

Hitting, pinching, pushing, taking toys and knocking over equipment are all overt ways in which children attempt to get their way through physical force, intimidation and harassment.

Both boys and girls may use these forms of power to gain control in play. Research suggests however, that boys are more likely to use these forms of power than girls (e.g. Libby & Aries, 1989). For instance, boys are consistently more assertive, noisy and physical than girls in their interactions with other children. This is particularly evident in children's fanatasy play where boys tend to engage considerably more in fighting and fantasy-killing than do girls.

Boys are consistently more assertive, noisy and physical than girls.

The legacy of overt expressions of power

Children who have been involved in overt power battles based on physical force, intimidation or harassment may avoid particular children or particular areas that are associated with negative experiences. Often there will be clear patterns to this. Girls may avoid areas where the boys are, or avoid playing with boys because they have learnt to associate boys with aggressive or violent behaviours. Sandra was one girl who developed 'no go areas' and 'no go friends' on this basis.

Glenda: I noticed in all the pictures I have taken of you playing in the sandpit you never seem to play with any of the boys. Why is that?

Sandra: *(Shrugs her shoulders, grimaces and then laughs.)* 'Cos they are mean.

Glenda: How are they mean?

Sandra: They pinch your bottom, they pull your hair [and] ... knock your blocks over. Daryl knocks sand over ... I don't like boys, they are not my friends.

Glenda: When does Daryl upset you?

Sandra: When [the teacher] doesn't see.

Sandra chose friends and activities on the basis of her previous experiences, some of which may have lasted only a few moments, for instance a pinch on the bottom. However, she subsequently avoided playing with boys as much as she could. She retreated whenever Daryl came near. Her experience told her Daryl often expressed his feelings by physically and verbally taunting girls, generally when adults were 'not looking'.

Both Sandra and Daryl were involved in creating and maintaining power relationships. Sandra through avoidance; Daryl through physical intimidation. It was however, an asymmetrical power relationship. The method of exercising power and its effects were very different for each child. Daryl played where he wanted with little hindrance; Sandra learnt to play wherever Daryl wasn't. The effects limited whom and with what she chose to play.

Daryl and Sandra's relationship was obviously one of uneven power from which Daryl derived greater benefit. It was a sexist power relationship created and maintained by the behaviour of both children.

Finding out that Sandra preferred not to play in the sandpit resulted from talking with her. If children have developed 'no go' areas it is important to find out why. You may be surprised to find that an incident you barely noticed, or dismissed, may still be influencing their decisions.

Covert expressions of power: storylines

Not all power is exercised in such overt ways. Focusing on children's fantasy play can uncover subtle and complex power relationships which bubble under the surface of their day-to-day lives. Exploring children's storylines can help you explore how these power relationships are built and practiced and to evaluate their gender consequences.

Storylines provide the structure, content, roles and rituals in much of children's fantasy play. Day-to-day experiences, television, books and videos provide children with much of the material for the storylines in the fantasy play. Storylines may be based on domestic events such as feeding the baby or washing the dishes. They may be based on adventure, such as looking for treasure or going camping, or on TV cartoon superheroes.

Children expend considerable effort in developing and agreeing upon storylines for their play. If they can quickly establish a mutually-understood storyline, the play often flourishes. This builds the children's friendship patterns. However, if there is no mutually understood storyline the opposite will happen.

Some questions to focus on how power dynamics might be operating through children's storylines are:

> Who makes the rules?
>
> Who chooses the storyline?
>
> Who ends the play?
>
> Who gets their own way?
>
> How do they get their own way?
>
> Who benefits, and to what extent, from the relationships in the play?

The answers to these questions are likely to change with the storyline, place and balance between boys and girls in the play. Is there a consistently equal sharing of power between the children? Do girls, as well as boys, experience power with and over others? Which boys and which girls regularly experience power in their play?

To illustrate how a focus on storylines can produce insights into gender relations, we will look at some children's domestic play in the homecorner. Domestic play has been chosen

Storylines may be based on domestic events such as feeding the baby.

There were brief moments when boys became involved in domestic storylines with the girls, as 'dads' or 'pets'.

because many non-sexist guidelines advise early childhood workers to encourage boys into domestic play and to move girls away from it. Exploring the gender power relations in such play brings this strategy into question.

All of the following examples are drawn from a recent study (MacNaughton, 1994) in which spot time checks over a period of several weeks indicated that girls were in the homecorner 90 percent of the time. Boys only made occasional—and very short—forays into this area. The girls were involved in domestic storylines without exception. In most instances, the boys were actively involved in adventure storylines. There were brief moments when boys became involved in domestic storylines with the girls, as 'dads' or 'pets'. Given that these patterns have been identified in several other studies (e.g. Connolly, Doyle & Creschin, 1983) they warrant closer exploration.

The girls

When girls are involved in domestic play the answer to the questions: Who makes the rules?; Who chooses the storyline?; Who ends the play?; and, Who gets their own way? is simple. 'Mum' does—she is all powerful.

In the MacNaughton study, 'mum's' power was evident in three ways. Firstly, having a 'mum' was essential for the play to begin. If a 'mum' could not be agreed upon the children often left the homecorner quickly. When 'mum' had been decided, they often played for 20 minutes or more.

Secondly, once the play began it was clear why it had been so important to find a 'mum'. For the girls' play 'mum' was the director, producer and writer of the storylines. 'Mum' also maintained the play by adding to it, reminding other children what to do and changing the play as needed.

Thirdly, 'mum's' power was evident in the way other girls regularly deferred to her:

Sarah (to Patricia): Mum, are you the mum?

Patricia: We're going out now.

(Sarah makes a move to the door.)

Patricia: Hang on, I've gotta get my shoes on.
(She repeats this three times.)

Sarah (to Patricia): Are we going out now?

Patricia: You need your shoes and your hat on.

(Patricia continued to direct the play for the next 20 minutes.)

Interpreting the girls' play in this way may be seen as reading relationships into their play which didn't exist except in an adult's mind. This is a distinct possibility if we rely only on adult interpretations of the children's world. New wave theorists (e.g. Davies, 1989) warn against such reliance, suggesting that it is important to explore how children understand their world and to understand why they act in the ways they do. Girls I talked to were very clear about the role of 'mum' and her power in the play. I have been told many times that 'mum' is

Domestic play is one of the few ways in which girls experienced power.

the boss. Molly put it succinctly:

Glenda: What's 'mum' do?

Molly: She's the boss.

Glenda: What does the boss do?

Molly: Tells people what to do.

The homecorner girls indicated to each other that they all understood that 'mother' was the boss. If you were 'mother' in the homecorner you wielded power, but it was a consensual power negotiated with, and agreed to, by the other girls. Domestic play was one of the few ways in which girls experienced such power.

The girls and the boys

Girls often resisted boys joining them in the homecorner. Asked why this was the case, the girls consistently said the boys 'messed up' the play or 'got it wrong'.

The boys 'got it wrong' because they ignored a rule that all the girls understood: 'mum' is the boss. It was common for them to refuse to acknowledge 'mum's' power by ignoring 'mum's' orders or trying to give 'mum' the orders. Insurgence involving physical acts of violence, such as throwing the baby or pulling its head off were not uncommon. Hence, boys attempted to gain and maintain power in verbally and physically aggressive ways. They competed with the girls for power, rather than negotiating as the girls tended to.

The boys also 'got it wrong' because they played the 'wrong' games—trying to introduce adventure or superhero storylines into the homecorner. These had very little to do with domesticity and offered 'mum' no easy role or power and so disrupted the homecorner and deprived the girls of power.

The sense that the boys would 'mess it up' could generally be derived from vivid recollections of what happened when they had last played with the boys. Matti and Maddy typify this:

Glenda: ... I think you and Maddy are trying to sort something out here. *(Referring to a disagreement the girls were having with two boys trying to enter the homecorner.)*

Matti: She doesn't want the boys to get the Barbie because they might ruin it.

Glenda: What might they do?

Matti: They might wreck it, they could wreck it ... are they rubber? *(To Maddy.)*

Maddy: No, but they could break their head. One of my Barbies broke the head. Ryan might break the head.

A long discussion followed about the other things Ryan had done and might do. Several of these events had occurred many weeks earlier!

Curtailing the girls' domestic storylines and the power relations the girls had constructed within them made it difficult for the girls to accept or desire play with the boys in their 'special place'. The girls wanted their storylines and the attendant power relations to flourish.

Girls developed a variety of strategies to encourage this, including leaving the homecorner when boys entered and shifting their domestic play to another place. Two less direct strategies involved the boys being offered the role of 'dad' or 'pet'. Each role, from the girls' point of view, worked in slightly different ways to successfully re-establish 'mum's' power. Being 'dad' effectively silenced the boys because the children understood 'dad' pretty much as a blank slate when it came to cooking or cleaning. Neither the boys nor the girls appeared to see 'dad' as an active participant in housework. From the girls' point of view then, 'dad' could be ignored. From the boys' point of view being 'dad' wasn't any fun and they reported being bored when playing with the girls.

When the boys were 'pets', life was less clear-cut for both boys and girls. For the boys, being a pet could be fun. Pets bark or meow and move about a lot but there was a problem with being a pet in the homecorner: 'mum' tells you what to do, especially if you are naughty! The boys as pets, and the girl as 'mum' often found themselves at odds with each other. This was the case when Sarah was 'mum' to three cats:

Glenda: Okay, so you were the mother, what sorts of things were you doing as mother? *(Referring to a video replay.)*

Sarah: Giving them milk. *(The boys as cats.)*

Glenda: And what did they do?

Sarah: Be naughty. Well they [illegible]e being very naughty. Some boys are very bad.

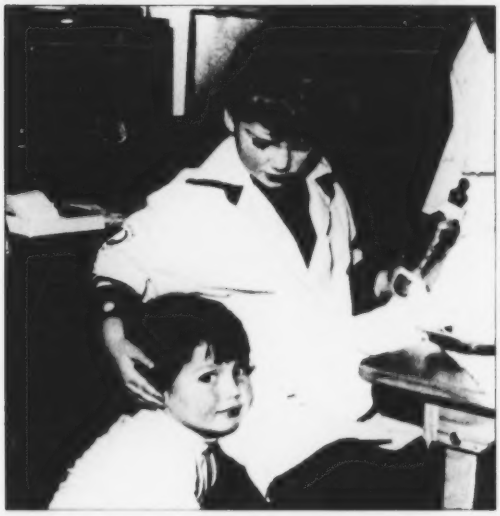
Glenda: What sort of things do they do?

Sarah's answers included 'hitting' and 'pinching'.

Being 'mum' gave the girls a position from which to control the boys' interventions—naughty pets could be punished and were frequently banished from the homecorner.

Most boys could not manage obedience to 'mum' for long and quickly moved to compete for power by being naughty dogs and cats. There was lots of laughter and giggling as they jostled with each other in cat fights, tipped up food bowls and ran away from 'mum'. It was the sort of play that was a feature of much of their boys-only play in other areas.

For many boys, being naughty, noisy and competing for power was a normal part of being male. From the girls' point of view the boys were 'being naughty'. They were breaking the storyline rules, especially obedience to 'mum'. They had 'got it wrong' and 'messed it up' yet again.



Some boys decided they would have much preferred being 'mum'.

The boys

Talking with the boys showed that they knew the rules in the domestic play but did not see the rules as appropriate to them because it was a 'girls' game'. The boys also said the girls would not let them play. There were good reasons for the boys feeling this. When the boys entered the homecorner the girls didn't want to join in boisterous play, so they left. Sometimes the girls said that no boys were allowed in homecorner. Often when boys entered homecorner there was no clear way into the girls' play and no role for them. The boys interpreted these things as the girls 'not wanting to play'.

Some boys were intensely aware of what it meant to be 'dad' and decided they would have much preferred being 'mum'. Sam regularly tried to be 'mum'. More often than not, the girls would not entertain this. He spoke of being 'tired of being dad' and had a keen sense of what being 'mum' might mean:

Sam: She *(Gwen)* wants me to be a dad, which I hate.

Glenda: Why do you hate that?

Sam: Because I don't like being a dad.

Glenda: What have you got to do when you are the dad?

Sam: Do all sorts—I don't know.

Glenda: What would you get to do if you were the mum?

Sam: Cook.

Further conversations with Sam reinforced the idea that he was expressing a desire to experience some of the power and action that Gwen had as 'mum'. Gwen consistently resisted this.

From talking with the boys it was clear that they knew 'mum' was the boss. The difference being that it was 'girls' play' not 'boys' play'. Girls gained power as 'mum', and this was one of the few storylines in which the girls could do this. For the girls, life was easier when they maintained the domestic play space as their own. For the boys, the moment they entered into domestic storylines, they lost power.

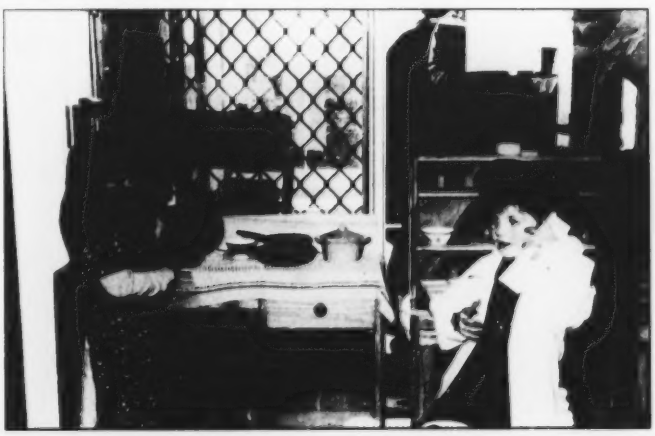
Research (e.g. Libby & Aries, 1989) suggests that boys learn to rely on physical and/or verbal aggression to gain and maintain power and that they tend to be very competitive in their communication, whilst girls learn to use verbal negotiation and work for power through consensus. The power dynamics identified in the domestic play discussed earlier indicates that immense difficulties arise for many boys and many girls when these different approaches meet.

Gender, power and storylines

Storylines often develop from the ways children understand and practice masculinity and femininity, and how they understand normal boys' behaviours and normal girls' behaviours. Theoretically, in our society children have some choice about how they practice being a boy and being a girl. For example, girls may choose to be traditionally feminine and dress in pretty dresses or they may choose to be non-traditional and act and dress like a 'tom-boy'. Boys may choose to be 'sensitive new age boys' or 'real little Aussie boys'.

However, children generally come to understand traditional forms of masculinity and femininity as normal. Many children glean from adults, peers, siblings, the media and daily experiences that many people consider there are limited ways to be normal as a boy or a girl. So, whilst it is possible for boys to be involved in domestic storylines and to bath or feed the dolls, children quickly learn that many adults and many other children do not recognise this as the best way to be male. They encounter statements such as, 'He's a typical boy', when playing with trucks or blocks. They rarely encounter such statements when boys play with dolls or dress up in frilly clothes.

Children's fantasy play can reveal to us a lot about how they understand what it means to be a girl or a boy. New wave theorists suggest that to fully appreciate why children choose traditional roles and relationships in their play we need to



Children generally come to understand traditional forms of masculinity and femininity as normal.

understand what they gain or lose by choosing to identify with and participate in particular storylines.

Exploring the dynamics of children's domestic play through the gender lens provides a sense of why many traditional gender-stereotyped understandings and behaviours persist. Girls have made a considerable investment in their particular understanding of gender and power. They also have some sense of what they might gain, or lose, by letting the boys into their world. So what can we do about it?

Challenging power relationships

Sexist power relations between boys and girls need to be challenged if we believe in gender equity. We can challenge overt expressions of power as they happen between children. However, we also need to challenge the competing ways in which many boys and girls express power through children's storylines.

The storylines the children in this study used in their play had significant implications for play between girls and boys in the homecorner. Boys and girls often learnt very different storylines, and hence different ways of creating and experiencing power. When they came to play with each other it was hard to enter into each others' imaginative world. Boys didn't know what to do in the domestic sphere other than to ignore it or compete aggressively for power.

If storylines are central to how children *construct* gender relations, then storylines offer a way of *reconstructing* gender relations. By analysing who benefits from particular power dynamics in specific storylines it is possible to think about how to challenge any sexist power relationships you have noted. This involves assessing the implications of any changes we make, assessing the storylines made available to the children and finding ways of introducing new storylines.

Identifying the power effects of children's play

It would be easy to say that boys need to be encouraged into domestic storylines in the homecorner and girls need to be moved out. But what happens when boys and girls are encouraged to play together in the homecorner? Do girls still have opportunities to establish and experience power in non-competitive and non-violent ways? Watch carefully to ensure that the boys have not taken over the girls' play and that the girls are not relying on aggression to maintain control. You may need to rethink if this occurs.

If being 'mum' is a significant way of experiencing power for girls, should we change homecorner in the ways that make it attractive for boys? What will happen if we do? Adding 'boys' clothes or toys to homecorner or turning homecorner into shops, for example, can make it more likely that boys may want to play in homecorner but often on their terms. They may want to'takeover' the play because they are 'dad' or run the shop. Girls may leave the area or end up assisting the boys in the shop or being subservient to 'dad's' needs in the home. Try to ensure that the girls' opportunities for experiencing power are not being negated by your changes to homecorner.

Should boys be able to be 'mum' and experience the power within this role? Does it enable them to experience a more nurturing and less physically aggressive form of power? If boys are beginning to engage in the domestic storylines think about the effects. Are they learning to nurture or are they introducing aggression to the area? You may need to step in quickly if the latter is the case.

If playing 'dad' in domestic storylines is seen by the boys as a non-role or 'boring', what alternative knowledge of the role of 'dad' could we offer the boys? Think about fun ways in which boys could be 'dad' which may increase their understanding of domestic tasks. For example, learning to bath babies or wash clothes with real water and soap, cooking real food and helping mend broken furniture or equipment with real tools. Ensure that girls have similar opportunities.

Find storylines that enable boys to develop non-competitive, non-violent understandings of what constitutes enjoyable play. Emphasise fun, excitement and adventure which is not based on violence, aggression and physical prowess.

Evaluating the power effects of children's storylines

Children's lives are pervaded by messages about how to behave as boys and girls. We need to think carefully about the gender implications of any new storylines we offer them. We need to think carefully about *who* will experience power, and *how* they will experience power.

Have we chosen storylines that enable boys and girls to learn non-violent ways of being powerful together? Storylines in which a child's ability to make things happen and to be strong and take control, derives from the use of magical abilities and objects, secret powers, access to machines, special words, actions or clothes—and not to individual physical prowess, shouting and aggression—can be particularly helpful if the success of this requires more than one child.

For example, needing two 'doctors' to operate special medical equipment for an operation or needing several children to contribute special words to make a spell work involve non-violent ways of being powerful in play with others.

Do our alternative storylines help us to create, maintain or reinforce traditional and sexist ideas about what it means to be a girl or a boy? Storylines which emphasise the excitement of life inside the home as well as outside the home are important if we are not to reinforce the idea that homelife is less interesting and less important than the world of work and adventure. Think about adventures children might be able to have in the homecorner. For example, cooking magic pies that give 'mum' special powers, planning and building an extension for the homecorner, or a minor medical emergency at home requiring first aid.

Do our storylines establish characters of power and influence that enable girls and boys to share equal feelings of power in their play? Storylines in which there are opportunities for girls and boys to alternate and/or share decision-making and leadership and to learn the advantages of shared decision-making are helpful. Lots of domestic and adventure storylines lend themselves to this. For example, introducing the idea of co-pilots in spacecraft or shared child

care at home means that more than one child can experience taking control of the spacecraft or child (and the play). You can talk with the children about the advantages of sharing, such as being able to rest when one is tired or call on help in emergencies.

Introducing storylines which minimise sexist power effects

An obvious way to introduce children to new storylines is through books. Stories can be chosen which introduce boys and girls to the diverse ways it is possible to be, act, feel and experience as boys and girls. They can also be used to help children to discuss how sexism affects their play.

However, girls may not always pay attention to stories that they see as boys' stories, and vice versa (Davies, 1989). Early childhood workers need to find additional ways of integrating alternative gender storylines into children's play. The following story shows how one worker approached this.

The story of Thomas

Thomas was unwilling to be involved in caring, domestic storylines. His unwillingness extended to destructive forays into the homecorner when the girls were playing there. His teacher (Sally) was concerned about his sexist power relationships and decided to teach him new storylines. In an effort to develop his understanding she provided him with specific and detailed information about how to care for babies:

'Thomas was standing next to me and didn't quite know what to do next, so I handed him one of the babies and said, "Could you look after my baby for me?" When he got it in his arms he really looked embarrassed. I gave him some techniques of what to do with a baby, like burping it and so on and he did that.'

However, Sally found that one-off interventions made little difference to Thomas' play, but being actively involved in children's play offered her a valuable position from which to develop shared storylines between the children. She decided to become involved in some hospital play with the children by playing their patient. The 'nurses' really didn't know what to do other than 'give needles', so she suggested that she needed to have something to read, needed to have food, and so on. Through this she felt they learnt a lot more than they would have through discussion.

Sally became more active in the children's play as a consequence, and provided them with very specific information to extend and to add detail to their storylines. It took several months of active work on their storylines to shift many of the boys' and girls' understandings of gender relations.

Conclusion

New wave gender theorists (Davies, 1989; Walkerdine, 1990; Davies, 1993) caution that much of our non-sexist work is likely to be unsuccessful in the long term because our theories of gender, and hence our approach to gender in the curriculum, have ignored one key issue: the question of power. They challenge us to explore the power dynamics involved in children's play, especially in children's storylines.

By taking up the new wave theorists' challenge to explore the power dynamics between children we can gain new insights into children's gender relations. Such insights can provide the basis for increasing the range of strategies we have for challenging sexism between children in early childhood. Using a variety of strategies can make our work for gender equity more effective and make it possible for us to work in the interests of all children.

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* particularly useful on 'new wave' theory

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